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Olympia 1936



BAND II
DIE XI. OLYMPISCHEN SPIELE
IN BERLIN 1936

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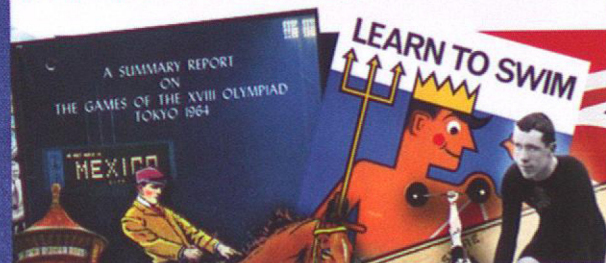
Sporting West
Yorkshire



OLYMPIC RECORD

2012 activities

...e of records on the modern Olympic and Paralympic Games and Cultural
...c. We have made these available online for the first time, providing you
...this rich resource on sporting and cultural history.



Mass Observing The Olympics

In 1937, Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge wrote to the *New Statesman* to invite volunteers to co-operate in a new research project called 'Mass Observation'. Mass Observation, they declared, would be "anthropology at home", recording the experiences, lives and activities of 'ordinary' people in Britain. Now, in its 75th year, Mass Observation has captured experiences of many significant sporting events, including the Olympics.

Mass Observation was prolific during the Second World War. The founders recruited a team of investigators to use ethnographic techniques to report on all aspects of British society and a national panel of volunteer writers who recorded their lives in diaries and responses to open ended questionnaires; known as 'Directives'. In 1981, after the establishment of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, the writing project was re-launched as the Mass Observation Project.

With many large sporting events cancelled during the war, the first phase of the Mass Observation Archive is largely free of references to the Olympics. Curiously, it does not appear that Mass Observation covered the post-war Olympics Games in London. In the months before the Games, the Panel were

directed to write about 'swearing' and in September the focus of the question was 'social class'. There is no Directive for July or August 1948. This may have happened because Mass Observation omitted a Directive in the summer months; this was becoming increasingly common as Mass Observation moved towards more commercial activities. Or this could simply be a consequence of the Directive question and responses not surviving in the Mass Observation offices.

There are however a few indications about how British people experienced the 1948 London Olympics in the diary sequence. A man from Hertfordshire wrote:
Did a little shopping in the morning and in the afternoon took the children to the Franklin's to see some Olympic sports on the television. We saw some swimming, running relays, high-jump, and nearly some water-polo, which I regret missing. Then we went to the station to meet Win, Gillian's mother, and home to tea. (Diarist 5216)

Whilst a woman from Morecambe wrote:
The closing day of the Olympic Games. From a purely personal point of view, I'm glad, as I've been bored [of] having to listen to the constant radio reports. But I should like to have seen the closing ceremony. (Diarist 5338)

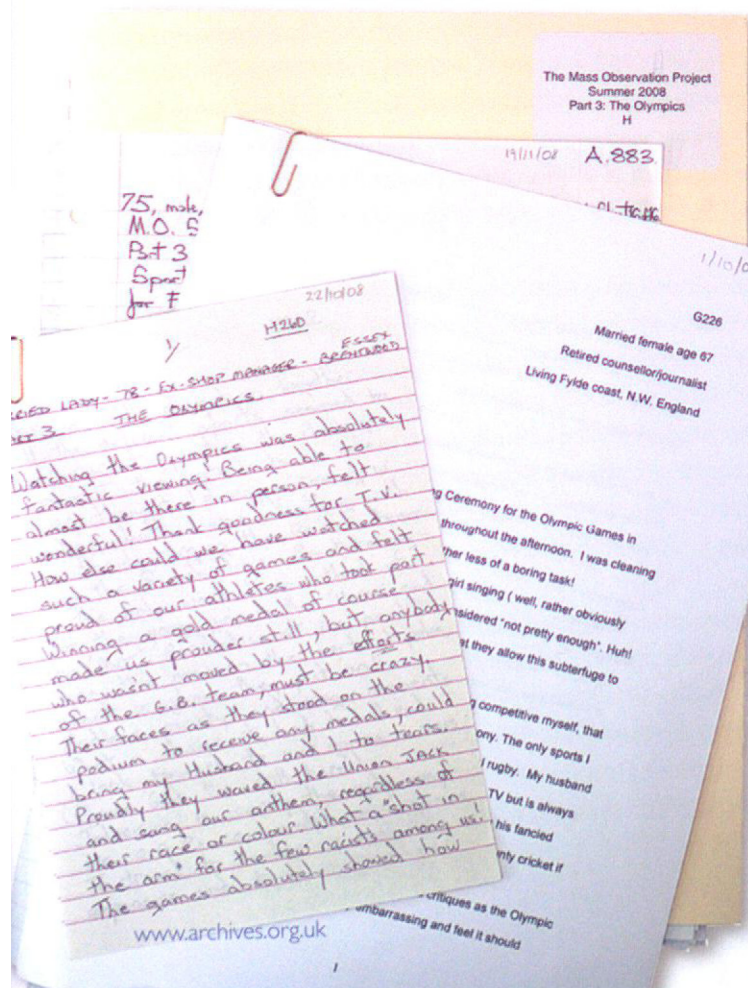
It is not perhaps surprising that the diaries of people who have just witnessed a war, only modestly acknowledge the so called 'austerity Olympics'. These diaries also represent an era before televisions sets were common in people's homes and a time before television was broadcast 24 hours a day on multiple channels.

Other mentions of the Olympics are interspersed throughout the Archive; a Directive in 1949 reflects on the increasing prestige of sport, and a diary written in 1972 covers the Munich Olympics. However, it isn't until 2008 that the Olympics are truly acknowledged, in the form of a Directive about the Games in China.

This Directive led to 211 responses, and researchers using these will discover a diverse reaction to the Olympics and to the Games in general. Many writers reflect on their personal enjoyment of the Olympics:

Well, I must admit to being one of the least sporty people on the planet, but I really enjoyed my ten minutes of Olympics each morning over a bowl of cereal. I have been going to the gym and trying to be fit for a good five years now, but I really I don't

Mass Observation responses to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex).





Mass Observation diaries and letters with references to the 1948 London Olympics (Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex).

have a sporting bone in my body. It is so very dull. But the Olympics is a time for amateurs who have put everything they have into their sport to shine on a world stage, and everybody enjoys the personal stories of how they got there. (W3967)

Whilst others offer comment on the political situation in China:

I am pleased that protestors politicised the games; it was satisfying to see the Chinese authorities challenged over their treatment of Tibet, not once but many times in the progress of the flame around the world. (V3767)

The majority of the responses also contemplate the impending London Olympics:

One hopes that our Games in 2012 will be as well organised...The emphasis must be on the sport and not the displays although one or two striking pieces of architecture – with a long practical life – would be welcome. (G4313)

This year, the Mass Observation Archive will ask the current Panel to record their thoughts and experiences of the London Olympic Games. Whilst we can't make up for opportunities lost in the past, to chronicle the 1948 London Games for example, we can hope that future responses will provide a colourful and illuminating insight into the London Olympics for years to come.

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